

NOTE: The following op-ed column by Corrections Director Mike Ferriter was published in many of Montana's newspapers during mid-October.

Those of us who work in corrections sometimes hear comments questioning the value of effectiveness of efforts to rehabilitate offenders, and suggesting that locking up criminals is the only way to prevent crime and preserve public safety.

The idea that less-than-perfect efforts at rehabilitation should be discarded in favor of more incarceration is a concern to the Department of Corrections, which has made a commitment to adding and expanding services that provide the kind of counseling, treatment and training that offenders need to be productive, law-abiding citizens.

First, I assure Montanans we recognize the need for some people to be locked up. That will always be a fact of life in corrections, as a matter of public safety.

Second, correctional system treatment efforts are about public safety and preventing offenders from committing new crimes. Risk reduction is a hallmark of all the department does in regard to treatment of offenders. It's called the risk principle and embraces the notion that the level of supervision and treatment for offenders be commensurate with the offenders' level of risk.

Third, treatment programs used in corrections are not drawn out of a hat. These are proven methods of transforming criminals' behavior by teaching them new social skills and targeting risk factors such as anti-social attitudes, substance abuse and mental illness.

Fourth, studies that some critics rely on to debunk rehabilitation are 30 years old, badly outdated and factually irrelevant.

Fifth, there's a common misconception that most criminals emerge from prison to resume lives of crime. Montana's recidivism rate is 39 percent, far below the national rate of 67 percent. And the majority of those repeat offenders are driven by substance abuse problems that might be addressed with additional treatment.

If Montana locked up most offenders rather than in alternative programs, the price tag would be daunting.

If the department put in prison most, or 51 percent, of the expected increase in offenders this year, the added cost for a year would be more than \$12 million. And that doesn't count the more than \$13.4 million price tag to build cells for these additional offenders.

Put most of those offenders on probation, at \$3.75 a day, with access to employment, family support and treatment, and you have saved money that can be used for schools, social services and health care.

To those who think the ability of corrections to correct offenders is a myth, ample evidence exists to the contrary.

A 2001 Florida study found that inmates completing GED, vocational and substance-abuse programs were more successful after their release than those who did not complete programs. A Massachusetts study in 2002 concluded inmates who completed various rehabilitation programs were 44 percent less likely to return to crime than those who failed to complete the programs.

Closer to home, 20 percent of those completing the sex offender treatment program at Montana State Prison return to prison for some reason – mostly for substance abuse-related reasons – but the rate for those not undergoing treatment is 49 percent.

Montana's WATCH program for treating felony DUI offenders has a 69 percent success rate. Increasingly popular "drug courts" – another rehabilitation program – have their own proven track record. A U.S. General Accountability Office study published in

February 2005 found a 10-30 percent reduction in recidivism rates for those who complete a drug-court program.

To be sure, not all rehabilitation programs work as well as others and rehabilitation doesn't work for everybody. But rejecting rehabilitation is a dangerous proposition since 97 percent of inmates eventually get out and we would be foolish to send them back without first exposing them to some rehabilitation efforts. That hardly protects Montana citizens or preserves their safety.

Promoting rehabilitation is not some idealized vision seen through rose-colored glasses. In my 30 years of working in corrections, I have had plenty of time to shake the stars from my eyes. One thing still holds true: Providing people opportunity to improve their lives and a little hope for the future makes sense for a safer Montana.

Department decisions on managing offenders are always a balancing act that weighs the need for public safety against the needs of offenders and concerns for victims. We do not expose Montanans to unacceptable risks in deciding placement of offenders.

Missoula is a good example, with 1,200 offenders under community supervision and, for the most part, living lives as law-abiding citizens who work hard to improve their lives and the lives of their families.

What must be remembered is that treatment programs and other rehabilitation efforts do help offenders, and that the price tag – both in terms of dollars spent and human lives abandoned – is too high to turn our collective back on assisting criminals to turn their lives around.